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The "Land of the Sky"

Today the "Land-of-Sky" (a name attributed to the region in a popular travel book about the region in 1876) can attribute much of its vitality to its unique geographic setting. Extending from Tennessee in the north to the South Carolina border in the south, its topography ranges from fertile valleys to rugged mountains. The Blue Ridge Mountains on the east and the Great Smoky Mountains on the north and west frame the region. The highest point in eastern North America, Mount Mitchell (6,684 feet) is located a few miles north in Yancey County.

The region is the center for tourism, manufacturing, trade, education, and health services. This center serves a larger geographic region stretching from Piedmont, North Carolina into the Tennessee Valley, and from the Virginia border into South Carolina and Georgia. The 1,867 square mile region encompasses Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania Counties and almost 320,000 people. Once known as the "Land Beyond" due to its isolation, today the region is accessible from any direction by major interstates, rail lines, and air service.

The early decades of the twentieth century brought boom and bust to the region as financial markets crashed following a period of development and land speculation. The middle decades brought slow to moderate growth as the economy diversified. Recent decades have produced growth in much of the region that exceeds national rates, in part due to tourism and retirement living. Asheville, Hendersonville, and Brevard have received high national ratings as "retirement places" and have diversified economies.

The Pisgah National Forest and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (the latter an hour to the west), the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Biltmore Estate attract millions of tourists who enjoy the wide expanses of mountain scenery. Each past major improvement has ushered in an era of growth in the Land-of-Sky region. Today, the highway network includes the intersection of Interstates 40 and 26 (with

the latter being completed north of the Tennessee line early in the new millennium), US 25, US 70, US 19/23, and other major thoroughfares. The completion of I-26 northward is expected to require increased intergovernmental cooperation. Being in a fragile mountain environment, the growing economy and projections of continued growth are encouraging local governments in the region to work together to manage that growth in a way that provides for the required infrastructure and yet maintains the quality of life and the natural beauty for which the region is known.

Case Study

The Land-of-Sky Regional Council decided in 1989 to undertake a broad regional strategic planning process with the goal of creating the best possible future for the four counties of Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania and their 15 municipalities. Its focus was to identify critical issues in the region and develop strategies to deal with the most strategic issues. It was neither an organizational plan nor a plan for one sector or issue area (e.g., economic development). Research and contacts with the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Tennessee Valley Authority revealed no strategic plan for a multi-county development district in their multi-state territories. The Council then obtained \$40,000 from ARC and \$20,000 from TVA for the "Regional Vision '95" as a demonstration. In return, a manual was to be prepared for use by others who might want to develop regional strategic plans. (Later, grants were obtained from ARC and the Economic Development Administration for a more sophisticated guide that was developed in cooperation with Bill Dodge. This manual, *Shaping Region's Future: A Guide to Strategic Decision-Making for Regions*, was republished by the National League of Cities in its Local Official's Guide Series and is available from NLC.) It is also listed as a key resource in the report prepared by CFED for the Economic Development Administration entitled, *"Strategic Planning for Economic Development: Moving Beyond the Overall Economic Development Program."*

Because of the geographical and topical scope of Regional Vision, a large number of stakeholders were involved. The Steering Committee was 30 persons, including the Council of Governments Executive Committee. Five strategic issue areas (education, land use/growth management, infrastructure, protection of the environment, and economic development) were identified and task forces formed, bringing additional stakeholders to the table. Overall, 100 persons from all sectors assisted. The process was eight steps adapted from Public Technology, Inc. (PTI), who consulted on the project. Thirteen strategies were in the Action Plan that was approved by the board in December 1991. An Action Task Force was appointed to oversee early implementation.

Important results were the training of the Council staff and others in the strategic planning process, greater awareness of regional issues and solutions, and institutionalizing the capability for strategic planning and thinking in the Council. The Council also saw the need to have staff skilled in meeting and process facilitation and has trained four staff members as facilitators at the Institute of

Government, UNC-Chapel Hill. Significant strategies which have been implemented include completing a study of regional air quality and implementing the key strategy recommended (a clean air campaign); greater regionalization of economic development; and reactivation of a former role--planning for protection of the French Broad River which flows through all Counties.

Following the regional plan, two of the four counties contracted with the Council to assist with their economic development strategic plans and a county outside the region contracted for a strategic public education plan. Recently, a town that has many aspects of a "bedroom community," contracted with the Council to develop a vision and strategic plan to guide its rapid growth. This town indicated recently its desire to contract for three additional years to have the Council staff help guide plan implementation. Confronted with the need to plan for telecommunications wider than the "Connect NC" program of the Governor's office, a regional strategic plan for telecommunications was developed, entitled "Connectivity for the Future." The "Connect NC" program carried the prospect of funding for specific strategies upon completing a successful plan. Three specific projects were funded in 1998--networking a county library system, establishing a web market for microenterprises, and establishing a task force to advise local governments on the development and use of telecommunications. Strategic planning and facilitation skills were also used to develop plans for a new program, the Voluntary Buffer Partnership, soon to be awarded an implementation grant from the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

Also, the Council undertook a Regional Strategic Assessment in 1997-98 to help guide the organization for several years. Due to the need for objectivity, consultants from the University of Georgia (Fanning Institute) were utilized. This emphasized improving the organization's communication with members, improving "ownership," and focusing organization resources on 10 priority regional issues.

One finding was that there is sometimes a "disconnect" between the Council's focus on longer-term regional issues and the shorter-term objectives of member governments. This is being addressed in several ways. The Council now regularly schedules Regional Roundtables on strategic issues at monthly meetings. Also, assigning a staff liaison to each member government enhances communication about Council programs, regional issues, and local government priorities. A member survey implemented in early 1999 resulted in ranking the strategic regional issues "in terms of which areas most need to be addressed by the Council," as follows:

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| ▶ land use/growth management | ▶ water quality and other water issues |
| ▶ infrastructure | ▶ air quality |
| ▶ solid and hazardous waste | ▶ economic development |
| ▶ aging issues | ▶ housing |
| ▶ transportation | ▶ joint provision of services |

programs and activities. Board and staff believe that it is important that the Council and its member local governments keep an eye on the long term and encourage "regional thinking."

In summary, the Land-of-Sky Regional Council has reaped benefits from undertaking its Regional Vision '95 plan almost a decade ago. Not the least is the institutionalization of the capacity to do strategic planning for programs, assisting individual member governments, and guiding regional problem solving. Overall, strategic planning has helped focus more on long-term regional issues that are strategic and vital, regardless of whether they are on the month-to-month "radar screen" of the constituent local governments.

Some lessons learned from all these experiences are:

Strategic planning is a vital tool for development districts;

- Multi-county (Development District) strategic plans promote intergovernmental problem solving and promote "regional thinking";
- A significant investment is required to develop necessary tools among staff, and resources are needed to develop strategic plans effectively;
- Involvement of stakeholders increases support for strategies, makes implementation more likely, and makes the district more accountable;
- The constituent members of Development Districts can make effective use of this district capability for their own programs;
- Partnerships and collaboration are increased; Strategic planning is not a "quick fix" and is not easy, but is needed for a Development District to be effective as a "regional convener" and problem solver; and
- Strategic planning is a continuous process.

Finally, the Council believes that there are at least 10 hallmarks of a "good plan"-- regional or local:

- Effective citizen participation (focus groups, forums, etc.)
- Ownership by stakeholders (especially boards)
- Informed (about present and future, internal and external factors)-- SWOT/environmental scan
- Collaborative
- Targeted/strategic (does not have to be "comprehensive")
- Implementation/Action Plan with timetable and identification of resources
- A Vision
- Facilitative process--not staff-dominated
- Intersectoral, Intergovernmental, Interdepartmental (I³)
- Becomes institutionalized

